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ABSTRACT

Noting that tutor training remains a persistent concern of writing center administrators, this paper contains the transcript of a tutor training videotape produced by the writing center at Merrimack College (Massachusetts) to augment the center's tutor training. The main parts of the tape transcript are titled (1) "Be Attentive"; (2) "You're a Tutor, not a Preacher"; (3) "Don't Judge or Grade"; and (4) "Avoid Discussing the Grade and Never Criticize the Professor." The paper notes that the tape illustrates the writing center's philosophy and tutoring style and that it may serve as a model for other writing centers. In addition, it provides the address for obtaining more information about the training tape. (JD)

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MERRIMACK COLLEGE PEER TUTOR TRAINING TAPE

ALBERT C. DECICCIO

With the increase today in the number of writing centers across the nation, a persistent concern of writing center administrators remains tutor training. As Kenneth A. Bruffee has explained, "Simply the presence of a sympathetic peer to talk over academic problems with seems to have some positive effect on students' work. But. . .in the long run the success of a peer-tutoring program depends a good deal on how the tutors are trained" (Paula Beck, Thom Hawkins, Marcia Silver, with contributions by Kenneth A Bruffee, Judy Fishman, and Judith T. Matsunobu, "Training and Using Peer Tutors," College English 40 (December 1978): 433; 432-449). One useful training device is the tutor training videotape. At Merrimack College, we have produced a videotape, and we have found that it serves to augment our tutor training program.

Below is the transcript of the Merrimack College Tutor Training Tape. We feel it illustrates our writing center's philosophy as well as our tutoring style. We feel the transcript may serve as a model other writing center administrators will follow to produce their own tutor training videotapes. It is in this spirit that the following is presented.

For more information about the Merrimack College Peer Tutor Training Tape, please write:

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Merrimack College Peer Tutor Training Tape

- Script prepared and written by Prof. Albert DeCiccio in collaboration with:

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- Videotape directed and produced at Merrimack College by MECCA 13, April 26, 1986.

In 1983 Dr. Judith Stanford and the Department of English started the Merrimack College Writing Center. They had seen demonstrated the value of the English Department's Peer Tutoring Program and knew that the Center would serve as the place where writers of all levels and abilities across the curriculum could talk with other writers about their work.

Peer tutors are the heart of the Writing Center. Most of the Center's help is provided by the tutors. Faculty do tutor and are available for assistance, yet faculty are resources and not judges of tutors. As a tutor your goal is to provide immediate, rewarding reinforcement to struggling student writers. You should emphasize the student's own work as the center of your attention.

Peer tutors work with students on a variety of writing problems, including invention, focus, development, organization; and for a variety of purposes, including class assignments, letters of application, resumes, and personal writing. Thus, the goal of the Writing Center tutor is to give student writers the chance to have another see their work and help them explore the various strategies by which to deal with the frustration that comes when a piece of writing doesn't seem to be going anywhere.

There are certain activities that you should and should not engage in. This tape will present several scenarios that will stress the importance of the tutor's role in the Writing Center.

BE ATTENTIVE

SINCE THE WRITING CENTER EXISTS TO PROVIDE ASSISTANCE ON A DROP-IN OR REFERRAL BASIS TO ANY WRITER WHO ASKS FOR IT, YOU MUST ALWAYS BE READY TO ENGAGE THE STUDENT IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT HER WRITING. THE INITIAL MEETING IS THEREFORE CRUCIAL, FOR IF YOU SHOW INDIFFERENCE OR, WORSE YET, A LACK OF INTEREST IN THE STUDENT, SHE IS NOT LIKELY TO COME BACK AND MAKE USE OF THE CENTER'S SERVICES.

"Excuse me. Are you a tutor?"

"Um, yeah, I guess I'm the only one here. Have a seat. I'll be with you in a minute. Just gotta finish up these math problems."

"Oh. Is this a bad time?"

"No. No. Have a seat. Just gotta finish up some math problems."

"Okay."

"Okay. What can I help you with?"

"Well this is my assignment. I'm supposed to . . . "

(Telephone Rings.)

"Just a sec. Hello. HI! Yeah how are ya? No way. No I didn't hear that. You're kidding. Aha, aha, no I cannot believe that. Okay, oh yeah, okay. I'll catch you later. Bye bye. Oh did you want somethin'?"

"Yeah I need help with my paper."

"Well, where is it?"

"It's right near you."

"Oh, oh, oh. All right. Okay what are you doing?"

"I'm supposed to analyze this poem and I'm having a hard time with it."

"Just a second. Sue! Hey the party, it's been changed to about 9:00. Yeah, Karen's gotta work late. She'll work until about 8:30. So I'll see you tomorrow at 9:00? Yeah, all right, see ya later. Um, did you need some help?"

"Yeah, my paper. I've been working on it and I'm having a hard time. I have to analyze this poem."

"Oh, okay. Um, any specifics?"

"Well, I have to paraphrase it first and then find the symbols in it, and I'm having a hard time."

"Yeah, poetry is tough. Um, listen, my time's about up here, but if you come back tomorrow there should be a tutor here. Anyone can help you."

"Thanks."

YOU MUST ALWAYS BE WILLING TO ENGAGE THE STUDENT IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT WRITING.

"Hi can I help you?"

"Yeah. I'm a little bit worried about a paper assignment."

"Well I can understand that. Paper assignments worry a lot of people. Can you tell me what your assignment is?"

"Um, yeah. It's about two people who meet for the first time, or two people who meet for the first time after not seeing each other for a long time."

"Do you have to write a story?"

"Yeah."

"That sounds like fun."

"Yeah it's fun, but the hard part is that one of the characters has to be from one of the stories we read in class."

"Oh, I can see your problem - why you're worried. Why do they do that, make things that can be fun hard?"

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who thinks that. But I do have an idea. I'm just not sure if it's a good one."

"Well, why don't you talk about it a little bit. How do you see yourself writing this story?"

"Well I know the play I want to use. It's A Doll's House by Ibsen. Have you read it?"

"Yeah I have; that's the one with Nora and Helmer. Nora leaves Helmer because he's a chauvinist."

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Helmer, what a jerk! I'd have left him too."

"That's what I thought when I read the story."

"Well, go ahead. Tell me how you see yourself writing the story."

"Well I definitely want Nora to be one of the characters. I think right after she breaks up with Helmer, I'd like to have her meet someone with the same attitudes as Helmer."

"That sounds terrific. It seems like you have a direction to go in. Do you have any idea how the situation will develop?"

"Well I'm not sure yet. I could have her buckle under the pressure, or I could have her stand on her own two feet and be forceful."

"That's good; both ideas are fine. The only problem is you'll have to decide how you feel about Nora when the situation unfolds. That'll be pretty complicated. Can you handle that?"

"Well I think so. What do you think about having Nora stand on her own two feet? Um, when I read the play, at the end of the play she was very forceful, especially in the language she used, and that is what I really remember about the play - and I think that's what I'd like to show."

"Well, I think then that's what you should do. Sounds like you have a direction to go in. That's half the battle. The only thing you'll have to do now is think about how you'll set this up for the reader. Do you have to add anything about the play or can you assume that your reader knows something about the play?"

"I think so. I think that the instructor might even like to read about Nora standing on her own two feet and being on her own. I think I might do that."

"Well good, and maybe when you do some writing, come back and we can talk about his a little bit more."

"Okay, thanks, I think I'll do that."

YOU'RE A TUTOR, NOT A PREACHER

THE TUTOR'S ROLE IS A DIFFICULT ONE, BUT IT DOES NOT ENTAIL PREACHING. IT DOES INVOLVE BEING AWARE OF THE STUDENT'S NEEDS AT ALL TIMES. YOU CAN ONLY HELP A STUDENT WRITER IF YOU ARE NOT OBLIVIOUS TO WHAT HE WANTS TO DO AND HOW YOUR SKILLS CAN ACCOMMODATE HIM. IT IS IMPORTANT THEREFORE THAT YOU SET UP AN AGENDA WITH THE WRITER TO HELP HIM DISCOVER A WAY FOR ACHIEVING HIS AIM AND REACHING HIS AUDIENCE. YOU SHOULD NOT FEEL OBLIGED TO HAVE A READY-MADE STRATEGY FOR EVERY WRITING SITUATION YOU'LL FACE. THIS KIND OF PREACHING USUALLY DOESN'T WORK WELL FOR ALL SITUATIONS AND USUALLY MEANS NEGLECTING THE STUDENT'S IMMEDIATE NEEDS.

"I'm having a lot of problems with this assignment. I was wondering if you can read it over and kind of give me some guidelines as to where to start."

"Sure, but we really don't need this. I've been tutoring for four years, I've been writing for much longer, and I know that every paper needs a good introductory paragraph, at least three supporting paragraphs, and a stirring conclusion."

"Okay, but right here I'm not sure what she means. Maybe if you could explain this."

"Believe me, we really don't need this. If we start here it should come out to...."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. I think..."

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU SET UP AN AGENDA WITH WRITERS TO HELP THEM DISCOVER A WAY FOR ACHIEVING THEIR AIM AND REACHING THEIR AUDIENCE.

"Hello. Can you help me out? I'm really stuck. I have this poem and I'm supposed to get a topic out of it and I am lost. I have no idea on how to even approach this."

"Um, any instructions from the instructor, any parameters?"

"The instruction was just to make a topic out of this poem."

"Okay, okay."

"I've never had to do that before so I thought that maybe, you know, that the Writing Center could help me out."

"Okay. Um, do you have any ideas from the poem, anything that interests you?"

"It's called 'Lot's Wife'."

"Who's Lot?"

"I don't know. It has something to do with a Biblical passage tho'."

"Ah this is the Bible then. 'While Lot, the conscience of a nation, struggles with the Lord.' Okay. Do you know the Biblical story?"

"More or less so."

"Have you looked at the Bible? I mean to check it out."

"Well."

"No, not yet?"

"That's what I'm here for. I didn't know even .... should I?"

"Sure, that might be a good place to start. We might want to see about Lot and his wife."

"Thanks I needed that."

"The only thing I can remember about the Biblical story is, wasn't Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt when she turned around and looked at the two cities? Does the poem tell us anything about that?"

"All I understand is that they both have different obligations almost: Lot's wife to her family and then Lot to, you know, the Lord. I don't know, just the two positions here: One devoted to the Lord and Lot's wife's devotion to her family."

"Oh, okay. It looks here like the Lord may kill the children tomorrow. Looks like the poem is probably written before she gets turned to a pillar of salt. Now if I remember the Biblical story, she's just mentioned. She says nothing. It may be interesting to see if that's the case and see what's said in the Bible about her versus what this woman says about her."

"Oh!"

DON'T JUDGE OR GRADE

THE TUTOR IS AN ADJUNCT TO THE PROFESSOR, TRUE. BUT THE TUTOR WORKS ONE ON ONE WITH ANOTHER STUDENT ABOUT HER WRITING. SINCE TUTORS SHARE EQUAL STATUS WITH STUDENT WRITERS, BECAUSE OF THEIR BEING STUDENTS, THEY CAN HELP THE STUDENTS SEE THINGS IN A WAY MOST INSTRUCTORS CANNOT. THE TUTOR/TUTEE CONTRACT CAN THEREFORE BE A PRODUCTIVE ONE, IF YOU REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE NOT A MINI-TEACHER, THAT YOU ARE A FACILITATOR WHO HELPS A WRITER GET GOING ON A PIECE. IF YOU ALLOW YOURSELF TO GRADE OR JUDGE, YOU MAY MAKE AN ALREADY SELF-CONSCIOUS WRITER MORE CONCERNED ABOUT HER WRITING AND PERHAPS FURTHER DAMAGE THAT STUDENT'S SELF-ESTEEM.

"Okay. Um. Let's see." (laughter)

"Anything wrong with it?"

"Ah, no. I was just thinking about something else. Um, gee. Did you know that you spelled 'a lot' five different ways in this paper and all of them are wrong?"

"Wow."

"And look at this - look at this over here - look at this. That's a comma splice. Have you ever heard of a comma splice before?"

"Well, isn't it when you - there are two different ..."

"Yeah it is, it's a thing with commas. You're really going to have to look this up in a grammar text and you're going to have to study that. This is bad; this is real bad. Now, what were you supposed to be writing about in this paper?"

"Well, we were supposed to write about a significant point in our life and I wrote about the summer when I was three years old."

"Aha, um, yea. Did something significant happen during that summer? I seem to see in here an awful lot of things that happened during that summer. Um, yeah look at this over here. Look at this sentence. There it is right there. Do you see anything strange about this sentence? 'Looking back on it my own expereince that after having talked about it with other people that I find hardest to explain that when I'm asked this question in class as being what happened when I was three years old'."

"Looks all right to me."

"It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't?"

"It doesn't make any sense at all. It's completely tangled up. You know what you really need to do here is that you really need to sit down and think about what one event in the summer of your third year was really

significant to you. You're going to have to figure out what one thing was significant and, really, what you have to do is find that thing and start writing all over again. This is ... you have to start all over again. You have to have an idea before you can start writing."

"Okay. Is any of it good?"

"Well, maybe there's something in here somewhere, but it's going to be pretty hard to find it. You're much better off just finding a significant piece of your summer and starting all over again. You know, you've got to start there before there's anything really we can do to talk about this."

THE TUTOR/TUTEE CONTRACT CAN BE A PRODUCTIVE ONE IF YOU REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE NOT A MINI-TEACHER, THAT YOU ARE A FACILITATOR WHO HELPS A WRITER GET GOING ON A PIECE.

"Hi would you like some help?"

"Yeah. I'd like to see if you could help me with this paper."

"Sure. My name is Kathy, I'm a tutor here."

"I'm Phil."

"You're Phil, okay. Phil, what was your assignment?"

"It's right here. I'm supposed to explain my favorite hobby and tell why it brings me pleasure."

"Okay. Do you mind if I read this."

"No, it's okay."

"Okay, thank you. It will be just a minute."

"Sorry about the spelling."

"Oh that's all right. There are a few errors but let's not worry about those right now. Okay?"

"Okay. (long pause) Does it make sense?"

"Yes, I think it makes sense. You have some good ideas, but I think there are too many non-related ideas to what the assignment was. Okay. Remember the assignment was to make a comparison, to make your audience understand why it gives you pleasure. Okay. Let's concentrate on the thesis. Could you read your thesis, please?"

"My thesis?"

"Sure."

"That'd be like what I was writing the paper about, right?"

"Right."

"Well, 'One of my favorite pastimes is listening to music. I really enjoy some types of music and I dislike others. Music sometimes affects my moods. I can compare my good moods and my bad moods with good music and bad music'."

"Okay. I think that that's pretty good but I think you should tell more about why music really gives you pleasure. Why it makes you happy. Okay? Make the comparison, make it evident in the first paragraph. Okay? so, how does music really give you pleasure?"

"I don't know. Good music puts me in a good mood."

"Okay that's good; you know, good music puts you in a good mood, but it's not clear in your thesis. That's not really what you're stating here. I was a little confused when you read it. Could you read this paragraph right down here, please?"

"'Musicians appreciate music much more than ordinary music lovers do and that's a big part of a musician's life. Listening to music probably does not affect a musician's mood as much, however, because music is his work. This is not true of all musicians but it is in some cases, such as a Jim Morrison and Janice Joplin. They both died tragically because of fame, popularity and the crazy lives they led'."

"Okay. I think that's pretty good but I don't think - it's a nice idea and everything - but I don't think that this appreciation fits in okay with your appreciation of good music in the thesis. I think that you should work with your thesis and on making everything related to that thesis. Okay? And then, also, your spelling is a little bit off. I think you knew that; but there are ways you can check it. If you know you have a word you think is misspelled, you can either use the dictionary or we have computers that you can just type it in and it will check the spelling for you."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"All right."

"Okay."

"So, I guess I'll work on it and come back."

"Okay that's good. We have other tutors here, and I think we can help you."

AVOID DISCUSSING THE GRADE AND NEVER CRITICIZE THE PROFESSOR

THE TUTOR IS OFTEN SEEN AS THE STUDENT'S ALLY AGAINST THE PROFESSOR. AVOID COMPROMISING YOURSELF IN THIS MANNER, FOR IT WILL ONLY MAKE THE STUDENT'S IMPROVEMENT LESS STEADY. TRUE, YOU SHARE AN EQUAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE STUDENT; AFTER ALL YOU'RE A STUDENT YOURSELF. BUT YOUR PURPOSE IS TO FACILITATE THE PROCESS BY WHICH A STUDENT SEES WHAT HE WANTS TO DO AND FOR WHOM HE WANTS TO DO IT. YOU CANNOT ACCOMPLISH THIS GOAL BY CRITICIZING A PROFESSOR. HELP THE STUDENT USE THE ENERGY HE EXPRESSES IN CRITICIZING IN A CONSTRUCTIVE WAY.

"What's the matter?"

"I've spent about three weeks on it. The grade is just ..... it's a mess."

"Oh, this is the one we worked on."

"Yeah, exactly."

"What!"

"Can you believe it? Unbelievable. I put so much effort and time into this thing for this result."

"Why? Why did he give you this grade?"

"Especially in here. Remember when we discussed this paragraph right here?"

"We worked on that."

"We worked on this."

"'Unclear'. It's clear to me. Is it clear to you?"

"Totally clear."

"The guy's not too bright, let me tell ya. This brings back memories. He did the same thing to me. We ought to fight him on it!"

YOUR PURPOSE IS TO FACILITATE THE PROCESS BY WHICH A STUDENT SEES WHAT HE WANTS TO DO AND FOR WHOM HE WANTS TO DO IT. YOU CANNOT ACCOMPLISH THIS GOAL BE CRITICIZING A PROFESSOR. HELP THE STUDENT USE THE ENERGY HE EXPRESSES IN CRITICIZING IN A CONSTRUCTIVE WAY.

"Hi. I was in here last week and someone halped me on a paper and I got a "D" and I worked really hard on this."

"Well, maybe we can look at the professor's comments."

"I don't see why. It won't help anyway."

"Well, maybe we could read what he wrote."

"All right, but it's not going to help. He doesn't know what he's talking about. I don't think he likes me."

"Well, we can just see what he has to say about the paper."

"Go ahead, it's not going to do any good."

"Let's see. He writes, 'lots of hard work, many hometown experiences - maybe too many.' What was the assignment?"

"Ah, I don't know. Something about an experience in our hometown."

"Um, and what did you write about?"

"Um, I wrote about. Let's see I wrote about the church that I'm involved in and how I help with the CCD program and one time that I took over a class for somebody. And, let's see, I write about downstairs sometimes after Mass we have pastries and I help cook. And I write about the schools that I went to in my hometown and my grammar school and I talk about the experiences that I had there. And I talk about my high school and about this really neat time when we went to the state championship. And I talk about the play - the senior class play that I was in - and let's see. And then I talk about my friends and what we usually do around, like on the weekends or something, we go to the beach and things like that. Just what the kids do around. That's about it."

"Do you see how many ideas you wrote about? How many experiences you wrote about?"

"Yeah, I guess so, but that's what he wanted. He wanted experiences in our hometown."

"Did he want many experiences or one experience?"

"Well, I guess it says one."

"Wasn't there one experience that you'd like to write more about?"

"Well, yeah I'd kinda like to write more about my high school, but it was only a three page paper and I already went four pages as it was, so I didn't think that I could write any more."

"Well, don't you think you could devote three pages to your high school, rather than telling a little bit about many experiences?"

"Yeah, I guess I could. There was a lot of stuff that I had to leave out because it was just too long. I think I could do that."

"Well, maybe we could work on that and focus your ideas."

"Okay, great."

TUTORING CAN BE A REWARDING EXPERIENCE - FOR THE STUDENT REQUIRING HELP, FOR THE COLLEGE, AND FOR YOU. THIS VIDEOTAPE SHOULD SERVE AS A INDICATION OF WHAT YOU MAY ENCOUNTER IN YOUR ROLE AS A TUTOR. USE YOUR COMMON SENSE AS WELL AS YOUR INNATE INTELLECTUAL ABILITY AND YOU'LL FIND TUTORING A MOST ENJOYABLE ACTIVITY - ONE THAT WILL HELP YOU IN YOUR FUTURE ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES.